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Inteviu: Absence / Presence: a Conversation with Charles Cohen

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From: Mark Cooley

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(Image: from the series "Standard Double")

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A conversation between Charles Cohen and Mark Cooley conducted through electronic mail – 2006

For a hypertext version of this interview please visit

<http://www.flawedart.net/interviews/indexcohen.htm>

See Charles Cohen's work at: <http://www.promulgator.com>

MC: I'd like to begin by exploring your use of the "cut-out" in some of your most well known works. I've been covering your Buff series in various new media related courses for a couple of years now, and several questions and points of discussion are frequently raised. Can you speak first about the dichotomy of absence/presence at work in these pieces: How do you wish this dichotomy to play out for your audience, and what role does the content of the original image play in this scenario?

CC: If I may, I'd like to dissect the viewing experience into three "effects" which the cut-out generates. The "first effect" is the immediate recognition of the void; a mere observation, not an intellectual reaction, per se. The second effect is "the abstract effect," which would be any subsequent intellectual activity for the viewer. This sets up an ideal and final "reflexive effect".

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The catalyst for the reaction is expectation. Because we expect nudity (in the Buff series) the suggestive poses of the subject and the conditioned responses of the viewer confront the void. This disconnect of what is expected with what is actually there has a variety of reactions in viewers. After digesting the experience, however, the question of what has happened occurs. This question, a momentary wedge in a normal viewing experience, sets up the "abstract effect". The viewer is questioning the nature of this particular type of imagery as well as the effect of imagery in general on the mind. It is no longer a transparent and immediate experience, as it is so often in photography where the experience is oversimplified. Finally, the pinnacle for the artist is to create a third, "reflexive" effect. The viewer dissects all viewing experiences to the degree where the subtleties of the construction of meaning are understood and, perhaps assumes co-authorship with the artist.

MC: You mention co-authorship and I'm interested in pursuing this concept because it echoes many of the discussions I've had with students regarding your work, but before we get into that I am interested in how you came upon the source imagery for Buff and analogtime (full title, Why I prefer digital clocks and can no longer pretend to like analog time) I'm wondering if you could speak about the significance of the specific imagery in the two series. While the cut-out seems to set-up a similar relationship between viewer and image in both series, it also seems to lead to very different results in terms of specific associations or meaning.

CC: The theme which my work tends to revolve around, the presence of absence, first surfaced in two photographic series, that and set (See linked statements for that and set). This work was created in 1997-1999. As you may or may not know, the Buff series starts with an appropriated image and the analogtime series is from film negatives that I took and happen to be in. The Buff work, which I am most known for, preceded the analogtime series from the Drop Out show at Julie Saul. Buff is an intellectual exercise to dialog with the viewer about expectation and imagery in general. I elaborate on this in-depth in the linked statement. The text from Curve: The Female Nude Now (by Sarah Valdez, Megan Dailey, Jane Harris) is also related and interesting. The analogtime images are an emotional exercise that follows the principles of Buff addressing issues of attachment and lack. I have embedded the intellectual mission of Buff into an emotional narrative in analogtime. And by being ! seductive and generic, the farewell scene sustains some of the abstraction issues that I addressed in Buff.

The fact that the main differences relate to love and lust were not planned per se but are certainly very relevant and seem to be a good way to differentiate. The white space in Buff would be a novel, retinal fling (albeit with an important invitation to think) and the analogtime silhouette would be the profound long-term relationship with a pain/pleasure point of entry. The similarity of the white space allows the viewer to project a thought in both cases, but those thoughts are very different for the two series. In Buff, while the exercise for me is detached, general and intellectual, for the viewer it may be more immediate and specific, facilitating co-authorship. While in the analogtime imagery the picture itself is specific, narrative and attached for me, the viewer's involvement is contingent upon appeal requiring more participation from the viewer.

I never show the two series in the same room and preferably not at the same time as the subtleties compete in the experience. The analytical differences are interesting but don't translate to an effective installation.

MC: I'm interested in touching on this concept of co-authorship that you mentioned previously. As you know, many aspects of digital culture (from products defined as fine art to those defined as entertainment or mass media) are celebrated and formed around ideas of "interactivity". It seems unfortunate that "interactivity", which suggests an opening for co-authorship with the participant, often boils down to a "user" clicking buttons to get to prearranged content. It has been pointed out many times that this kind of "interactivity" is not fundamentally different than flipping through a book or channels on a t.v. remote. Do you think our culture's fascination with gadgets and clicking buttons has had any effect on the kind of conceptual interactivity one can have with (or through) static imagery? Relatedly, I've had many classroom discussions in which I've posed the question, "what is interactivity?" – almost inevitably, responses tend to revolve around manipulating gadgetry. Technologies and representations made with them tend to lose their roles as mediators between people and their ideas and become ends unto themselves. Communication and interaction seem lost at

this level. Do you think that technology sometimes serves to alienate or distance people from conscious interaction with their environments? I'm also partly interested in this question because much of your work seems to suggest or conjure simultaneous feelings of intimacy and distance or alienation – not only in your Buff and analogtime series, but I get this sense in your set, that and Standard Double series as well. What are your general or specific thoughts along these lines?

CC: Hmm. That's a great point of entry for me in particular. I was raised on the tube. The effect of the preoccupation (if you don't mind) of the gadget and related control/interactive devices depends on the individual and has the potential for positive effect. In the analytical realm, however, clicking should never merit interactivity. Perhaps co-authorship is the standard for interactivity.

I was just talking with a friend about a more recent addition to the analogtime series that explicitly includes issues of memory, narrative, projection and therefore control. The name analogtime reflects the multi-temporal nature of the images for which the silhouette is directly responsible. By "multi-temporal" I mean the image depicts the record of a past event/gesture and is an explicit revisiting of that event in the viewing present as well as a longing for something in the future. The silhouette draws attention to the process of making the image as well as the motivation, and draws the viewer into the equation, making the narrative relative to the present moment. This reflexivity within the image, for the viewer and between the image and the viewer is interactivity.

When you ask if technology causes alienation and distance, I say yes, except that distance (and alienation) can be an opportunity to understand the way in which we process mediated images and to enhance interactivity. It only takes the tiniest pause for a numb moment to reveal profound, reflective insights. I was an anthropology major in college and I identified very much with an underlying principle in ethnographic fieldwork – participant observation. That is, the blending of analytical distance with whole-hearted engagement. It is perhaps recognizing this in my own thinking that drew me toward making art – for I feel that artwork is an even more satisfactory resolution of these contradictory thoughts than prose. I'll leave poetry alone except that de-contextualized and duplicitous language has a desirable effect for me.

This contradiction or in-between state of participant observation is something that is more difficult to convey than language traditionally permits. If two exclusive voices exist in our mental faculty, that is, solely participation or solely observation, then it is visual language that can set up an experience for communication rather than a verbal account that simply constructs the message for one-way delivery.

In the analogtime pieces I am attempting to blend "account" with "experience" using conflicting modes of time to address the same contradiction in the image as well as that which sets up the image. The pieces include active gestures like reaching or embracing but they refer to something not there and therefore past. In the set series there is also an underlying duality – that of natural and artificial light. The images are all taken at either dusk or dawn with an overlap of outdoor lighting betwixt and between. That one cannot discern the time of day is intended to alienate the viewer as well as highlight a form of beauty in the lack of knowledge. The same goes for the that series of billboard profiles. There is no face, or information in the image – the original function debunked as the viewer surrenders to questions, not answers.

Ultimately my art and all contemporary art is perhaps a projection of an inner duality that engages and provokes thought in equal amounts.

MC: I'm interested to know what your thoughts are on how the cut-out has been popularized in advertising imagery in recent years. There are numerous examples that I've come across, but the obvious and by far the most enduring is the iPod campaign. It interests me because it seems an ideal example of how similar technical and formal applications can be initiated by very different conceptual intentions and work toward very different affects for viewer / participant – or stated another way, an illustration of how context determines meaning. I'd like to know your thoughts, if you've had any, on how the "cut-out" seems to function in your work

in comparison / contrast to how it functions in commercial applications – specifically the iPod campaign?

CC: I once scribbled, design is to “ooh!” as art is to “oh”. Design seeks to hook while art aims to cause pause. Apple and its image makers don’t necessarily want thought, only impulse. Sadly, this is what a viewer often wants too. The viewer wants what the image wants and we gladly cooperate. (This is a plug for a great book, “What Do Pictures Want” by W.J.T. Mitchell). With this difference between art and design in mind, I try to take advantage of the seduction dynamic with a little kung fu and some blank space. I probably mean some other martial art, but I am referring to the ability to redirect energy coming at you, to turn an ad image on its head gracefully, like Marx did analytically to a table, unlocking the implied forces within and re-empowering the viewer. Marx would clearly side with the viewer (if I haven’t made him roll over yet), because it is the viewer that constructs the meaning of the message. The result is revolutionary. Like a French saboteur, the silhouette disrupts the fetish mechanism and unleashes a flurry of thought. The iPod ad insidiously lacks who they think you want to be (the silhouette). The message is lack itself—you lack meaning without an iPod. The void I emphasize simply asks the viewer for an idea and in return grants authority to the viewer.

Regarding the silhouette, I often consider the allegory of the cave and some general eastern thought, i.e. that the world we experience is merely light and shadow distraction interpreted by an ego mind. I hope to transcend the fiction (rather than profoundly reinforce it) by indicating the relationship between one’s mind and the flickering shadows. My friend Max who works in IT once said, “it’s amazing how much you can discern about a communication only knowing that it took place”. Perhaps, in looking at a silhouette, the viewer, once implicated and engaged in the dialog, knows the significance of his role and thus the sensation of reality without knowing what in fact that reality is.

About the artists

Charles Cohen (New York, USA) Currently represented by Bonni Benrubi Gallery in New York, Genovese/Sullivan in Boston, Patricia Faure in Los Angeles and Imago Galleries in Palm Desert, Charles Cohen participated in the Core Fellowship program at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston after earning his MFA in photography at the Rhode Island School of Design. In addition to traditional photography Cohen uses video, digital imaging and sculpture to explore various aspects of a central theme—the presence of absence. Cohen often finds or applies abstraction to mundane subjects in order to complete the meaning of a piece by engaging the viewer. His “Buff” series has been exhibited in New York, Paris, Boston, Houston, San Francisco and Portland. It can also be seen in two recently released books: “Digital Art” by Christiane Paul published by Thames & Hudson, and “CURVE: The Female Nude Now” by Dailey, Meghan et al, published by Rizzoli.

Mark Cooley is a new genre artist interested in visual rhetoric, forgotten histories and political economy. His work has been exhibited in many international venues both online and off. Mark is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Art and Visual Technology at George Mason University.

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